

Moncure Conway: Southern Emancipator – Rev. Doug McCusker

I have only just begun my exploration of the life and times of Moncure Daniel Conway, the namesake of this worship hall. I do not claim to be a scholar as I know we have several among us. And yet, I must confess that I have become smitten by the erudite pen and engaging voice of this son of Falmouth. Forgive me if my prose sounds quaint for he has cast a spell over me.

I intend to continue my study, for Mr. Conway has much to teach us in these trying times. You will be hearing more from him during my ministry here. This all began, because my predecessor, Rev. Walter Braman left me some books in the office upon his retirement. Or perhaps he failed to clean up after himself. Whatever the case, I came upon a 2-volume set of the autobiography of Moncure Daniel Conway on the bookshelf.

All I had to do was open the book to some random page and begin reading a few pages to realize that this man was extraordinary. This spectacular story teller opened a time portal that transported me to this very spot in Falmouth in the years preceding the civil war. The more I read, the more I realized Solomon's wise words that there is nothing new under the sun. Or as Andy Cameron's history professor used to say, "if you want to learn something new, read an old book."

Mr. Conway, or Monc as his friends called him, was more than a writer of prodigious talent. He was also a Unitarian minister of the Transcendental persuasion, the son of a slaveholder, a Southern abolitionist, a pulpit prophet, and a down-to-earth human being who struggled mightily with the societal issues of his day.

As I read his account of the ante-bellum period of the 1850's, I couldn't help thinking about how similar it was to our current situation. That was a time of tremendous polarization around the issue of slavery. To be a preacher in touch with the angst of the times, necessarily required mixing politics and religion. And Monc found himself right in the middle, despite his attempts to pursue a "quiet, though not silent course concerning slavery."

Based on what little I knew about Moncure Conway, I expected that he was a firebrand abolitionist like William Garrison or Theodore Parker. But much to my surprise, I discovered a reluctant prophet like Jeremiah who tried to resist his calling to no avail. His autobiography unveiled the gradual and relentless journey of prophetic career. I saw a lot of myself in his words.

He grew up in a well-to-do family of a long line of lawyers and judges. His grandfather was the county clerk here in Stafford County for 47 years, and his father was the long-time magistrate. They owned a small farm about 2 miles from here, which included a few slaves, mostly for the domestic labor.

He was a bookish youth who attended Fredericksburg Academy and then Dickinson College, a Methodist school at the time. He completed his college studies at 18 years old and returned home not really knowing what he wanted to do with himself.

His cousin, John Daniel, edited a prominent journal in Richmond, to which Moncure wrote some essays and fictional stories. John was one of Edgar Allen Poe's editors, and he introduced Moncure the poetry of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

His father found him a clerk position for a Judge in Warrenton, and it seemed that Moncure would follow in the family profession. In the summer of 1850 he was well on his way to completing his studies for the bar, but his heart wasn't into it. He was going

through a spiritual crisis of purpose when one day, while visiting his parents, he took a walk along River Road, right behind us, heading toward the Chatham property.

He stopped at a natural spring to draw some water and out of the bushes came 2 mulatto children, completely naked like Adam and Eve. He talked with them for a little while and then he sat to meditate more deeply on the condition of race in America. He opened a publication that he had brought along and the first article he came to was from Emerson. The very first words hit him like an arrow: "It is remarkable that involuntarily we always read as superior beings. All that Shakespeare says of the kings, yonder slip of a boy that reads in the corner feels to be true of himself."

Conway thought, "what 'self' was this? Clearly not the soul of which I was so familiar. I had caught a vision of my own superficiality, perhaps also of the ease with which I could consign a whole race to degradation. I do not remember whether my theory of negro inferiority was consciously altered, but an overwhelming sense of my own inferiority came upon me. I was left with a determination to devote my life to the elevation and welfare of my fellow-beings, white and black. The man of Nazareth had drawn near and said, "What thou dost to the least of these my brothers, thou art doing to me."

From that point, Conway decided to enter the ministry, first as a Methodist circuit riding preacher, and then eventually to Harvard Divinity school to become a Unitarian Minister. While he was in Boston, a fugitive slave, Anthony Burns was captured and the owners came to retrieve him. They happened to be 2 people from Falmouth who he had known all his life. This situation became a flashpoint of controversy because the Fugitive Slave Act had just been passed. This was one of the first tests and it revealed the wide chasm between points of view on this explosive issue. In the north, anti-slavery sentiment was running high.

Conway was sympathetic to the plight of Mr. Burns. He attended the trial but did not get involved. He recounts a scene that I could see happening today. The slave owners marched Mr. Burns away from the courthouse along streets that were draped in black. At one corner a flag was turned upside down to which suspended a coffin inscribed "The Death of Liberty."

Shortly thereafter, Conway graduated from seminary and was invited by All Souls Unitarian in the District of Columbia to come preach in their open pulpit. Slavery still existed in the capital. Since his family was well known there, he knew he had to inform the church of his anti-slavery views. In his first couple of sermons he spoke out against the evil institution even with several Southern congressmen in the pews. To his surprise, they voted nearly unanimously to call him as their minister.

It may have been okay in the District for him to express his views, but back in Falmouth it was a different story. Several of his uncles and cousins were highly critical. One day while visiting home, he was walking down main street and a throng of young men, some of whom he had gone to school with, surrounded him. Word had gotten back that he was an abolitionist and that he had tried to interfere with the capture of the enslaved man, Anthony Burns.

They told him to leave and never come back because he was dangerous to have around their slaves. He left without telling his family, but forever felt the sting of exile. Conway mused that in those tumultuous days before the war, the slavery and anti-slavery sides had turned into hardened orthodoxies like religion. Each side vilified the

other and in Congress several of the senators came to blows. Conway being from the South knew good people on both sides and was therefore able to differentiate the issues from the humans caught within the grips of the system.

This is something that we must remember in this time of sharp divisions and harsh politics. Whenever I catch myself railing against the amorphous “them” or “those people”, I realize how easy it is to objectify my fellow humans with whom I disagree. By the same token it is too easy to give the system of oppression a pass and focus only on individuals.

Many of my clergy colleagues here in Fredericksburg, have congregations deeply divided along political and racially charged issues. This is true in many mainline Protestant churches that are divided over whether to officiate gay and lesbian marriages. This tension intensifies whenever society goes through rapid cultural change that outpaces the ability of religion and politics to flex accordingly. The tension, is a necessary processing of change.

Conway’s pulpit in D.C. was situated right along one of these fault lines. With his sympathies split between his beloved South and his opposition to slavery, he came to the opinion that perhaps it was best if the North and South went their separate ways – like a divorce on amiable terms. He could not bear the idea of a bloody war, but he could sense that the temperature was rising to a fever pitch.

Peace became his priority even if it meant the continuation of slavery in the South. And for this he eventually lost his pulpit in D.C. Preaching the disunion of the nation was too extreme for his congregation. Again, he was exiled for preaching his views. But because he knew good people on both sides he had a love for the people that transcended the concept of nation or even congregation.

After leaving D.C., he was called to lead a church in Cincinnati. From there his writings and sermons became the moral conscience of a nation. Some of his most eloquent admonishments came during this tumultuous era.

Being a prophet like Moncure Conway can sometimes be lonely and at other times exhilarating. People may shun them and sometimes kill them as in Jesus’ and Martin’s cases. Although Moncure’s life was spared, his exile felt like imprisonment. But Until we end oppression in all its forms, we will have a need for prophets like them to remind us of what love means. We must listen to their messages, study their words and use their vision as a roadmap for human growth. It is fine to revere the prophets after they have gone, but the longest lasting monument to their legacy is in the way we live and treat each other.

When we enter this Worship Hall, named after Moncure Conway, let us devote ourselves, as he did, to the elevation and welfare of our fellow-beings. Prophets aren’t special beings. We can all be prophets when we find the courage to speak and act according to the human values that connect all of us. Let us never be afraid to speak our truth in love, no matter the consequences. May we find the courage to act when the spirit call us. The world needs to hear you.